

4/06/2004 This Week In Congress

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April 6, 2004

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

House Passes Federal Highway Bill

On Friday, the House passed the Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, which reauthorizes funding for federal highways, public transportation programs and safety initiatives for the next six years. In Kansas, this bill would invest more than \$2.1 billion in transportation programs. It is estimated that it will create and sustain about 95,000 jobs throughout the state, which helps fight outsourcing. A conference committee will now work out the differences between the House and Senate-passed versions of the bill.

In addition to providing new funding for Kansas infrastructure, this legislation contains provisions that would provide more flexibility in federal Hours of Service regulations for truck drivers engaged in transport of agriculture commodities and farm supplies, operators of groundwater well-drilling rigs, and utility service vehicle operators. This flexibility will help these industries continue to provide essential services and enable them to respond in a safe and timely manner. Also included in this legislation is a proposal to restructure and extend the ethanol tax incentive.

The renewal of the ethanol credit is great news for Kansas, not only because it makes ethanol gasoline more competitively priced, but because it creates yet another market for Kansas-grown commodities. In a difficult economic time for our state, this legislation ensures more jobs for Kansas workers as well as providing safer highways, roads and bridges for everyone traveling in our state.

Reimbursing Our Returning Soldiers

On Tuesday, the House passed legislation to retroactively reimburse U.S. military service members for their domestic travel expenses when they returned to the U.S. from places such as Iraq and Afghanistan for their two-week rest and recuperation leave. Last year, I co-sponsored legislation to pay for troops' domestic travel expenses. However, that funding did not go into effect until December 19, 2003. That meant that troops who returned prior to December 19 had to pay for their travel expenses out-of pocket, while troops who returned after December 19 did not. It does not make sense that one group of returning soldiers would have to pay their own way home to visit family and friends, while other soldiers did not.

The Senate passed a similar bill earlier in the month, and the legislation will now go to President for his signature.

Medal Presentation

On Saturday afternoon, I presented military medals to the family of Anthony Francis "Frank" Dreiling at the VFW in Hays. Mr. Dreiling served in the U.S. Army from February 10, 1951 through December 4, 1952, but passed away before he received his medals. At the presentation ceremony were members of Mr. Dreiling's family, including Lillian Dreiling, his wife of Hays; Ann Price, his daughter of Rose Hill; David Dreiling, his son of Antonino; Kathy Rogers, his daughter of Norton; Laurie Fleener, his daughter of Hays; Rusty Dreiling, his son of Ellis; Chris Price, his grandson of Rose Hill; and Viola Ross, his sister from Hays.

Rural Development Forum

On Tuesday afternoon, I participated in the Congressional Rural Caucus' forum on job losses and economic decline in rural America. The panelists shared the same thoughts and concerns that I heard from many Kansans during my "Big First" Listening Tour. The panelists expressed their concerns about the outsourcing of our manufacturing jobs, the rising costs of health care and the loss of jobs in their community. During these tough economic times, it is important that my colleagues and I continue to look for ways to strengthen the economy and create more jobs here at home.

Attending Performance of "Handel's Messiah"

On Sunday afternoon, I attended the Bethany College Oratorio Society's performance of Handel's Messiah. Performed at Bethany since 1929, the Messiah is a glorious performance about the birth, life and death of Jesus Christ. My wife, Robba, and I were the guests of the president of Bethany College, Mr. Paul Formo, and his wife, Pat.

Reforming Pension Plans

On Friday, the House also passed legislation designed as a temporary solution to help maintain the operation of worker pension plans during the next two years. Under the legislation, companies can reset the formula they use to calculate the contributions they must make to their pension coffers. Keeping these plans afloat will reduce the likelihood that the taxpayer-funded Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) will have to step in and pay benefits to underfunded pension plans. Congress is considering long-term reforms to strengthen the benefit system that plays a key role in the retirement security of millions of workers.

This legislation will now go before the Senate for consideration.

Grant Announced for Kansas Soldiers' Home

On Thursday, it was announced that the Kansas Soldiers' Home at Fort Dodge received a \$1.14 million grant to upgrade the heating, ventilation and lighting at the facility. The funding will be used to upgrade the heating in Nimitz, Grant and Lincoln Halls, and to replace the roof of Halsey Hall. The funding will also be used to upgrade the lighting in all of the halls, which will save the facility about \$15,000 per year in energy costs. In addition, the water cooling units in Eisenhower Administration Hall will be upgraded to air cooled units, saving the home about one million gallons per year in water usage. The funding is through a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Improving the quality of the facilities that our veterans depend on is an important step in ensuring that our veterans receive the care they deserve. These improvements will improve the efficiency of the home, helping them to better serve veterans.

In the Office

In the office this week were city officials and Chamber of Commerce members from Dodge City, Garden City, Great Bend, Hays, Liberal and Ulysses to discuss issues ranging from Essential Air Service and highway funding to health care and energy costs. This is the cities' annual trip to Washington, D.C. to discuss federal legislation that affects our local communities. Ina Selfridge of Burdett, on behalf of Women In Farm Economics, was in to discuss energy costs, while Kenoln Johannes of Topeka, John Heise of Scranton and the Garrett Rezac family of Onega were in to talk about bio-diesel and soybean importation on behalf of the Kansas Soybean Association.

Richard Epard of Colby and Kelly Davidson of Wichita visited on behalf of Land O' Lakes to discuss agriculture and trade policies. Jerry Bohn of Pratt, Don Hineman of Dighton, Tom Toll of Lindsborg, Jon Ferguson of Kensington, David Cross of Lewis, Terry Handke of Muscotah, and Matt Teagarden and Dee Likes of Topeka, all with the Kansas Livestock Association, were in to discuss ways to promote Kansas beef. Ellen Morgan, executive director of the Association of Community Arts Agencies of Kansas from Salina and Lee Hitchler with the Kansas Thespians and Arts Advocacy of Overland Park, were in to discuss funding for arts education, while Dr. Mary Hassett, with Fort Hays State University, was in to discuss nursing issues.

In for a tour of the Capitol were Cal and Tamara Jost of Hillsboro; Jeff, Chris, Marshall and Kelli Schlyer of Hays; Jerry and Kay Hawks of Norton; Dwaine and Rosalie Shorman of Clay Center; and Carl and Bonnie Dudley of St. Johns.

Also in for a tour were Herbert and Mildred Jamison of Quinter, Charles and Karen Dennett of Russell, Henry and Doris Travis of Salina, Francis and Clema Anderson of Abilene, Val Gene and Jane Isaacson of Scandia, and Shirley Finke of Emporia.

I also met this week with students and sponsors from Phillipsburg and Smith Center, including Amber Bohl, Ashley Conrad, Jill Dusin, Karma Gitchel, Amber Keesee, Alyssa Kirchhoff, Heather McClain, Lacy Rummel, Amanda Taylor, Gabrielle Werner, Mary Zillinger, Grant Babcock, Mitch Beard, Jason Calhoon, Eric Christensen, Jesse Imm, Brandon Kaup, Matt Koelsch, Eric Kraft, Brad Rachnow, David Ruhm, Jason Stegmaier, Kurt Thomas, Eric Wagner, Thaine Willer, Charyne Hayes, Haleigh Holt, Sara Katenburg, Andrea Wilson, Jenna Wilson, Conner Barnes, Josh Cole, Lucas Scott, Caleb Wick, Patt and Tad Felts, Donna Jarvis, Tim Beikman, and Susan and Terry Thomason. Escorting the group was Barbara Dennis. Since 1978, Ms. Dennis has accompanied tour groups to Washington, D.C. and New York. She has brought more than 55 groups to our nation's capital over the years.

Very truly yours,

Jerry